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Mysterious light in night sky

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A mysterious light show across the night sky both east and west of the Mississippi sparked debate Wednesday with few able to agree on what caused it.

It was described as everything from a pinpoint to a moving spiral to a glowing cloud to "a big ball of fire," although astronomers said it probably was related to the annual Perseid meteor shower.

Residents of Clark County, Ky., east of Lexington, said they saw a bright flash at 9 p.m. (CDT) and then their houses shook when something went bump in the night with a bang like dynamite.

Seen in LR area

Residents in the Little Rock area and in Louisiana also reported seeing a bright light in the sky about 9 p.m. But most of the reports came from states east of the Mississippi. "It was definitely not a meteor," Denise Sabatini, vice president of the Syracuse, N.Y., Astronomical Society, said. "Meteors burn off after seconds. This lasted five to seven minutes. It was really quite spectacular."

Some speculated it was a satellite or rocket release of barium gas, used to study the upper atmosphere. But workers at Cape Canaveral, the North American Aerospace Defense Command at Colorado Springs, Col., and the NASA facility at Wallops Island, Va., all confirmed there were no launches Tuesday.

At Ohio's Bowling Green State University, Ronald Stoner, a physics and astronomy professor, said he suspected the display was caused by the Perseid meteor shower, produced by the remnants of a comet.

'Pieces of dust'

"It is caused by little bits and pieces of dust from the comet. They're very small," he said. "If there were a larger piece, and an icy piece of material, something about the size of a snowflake, it

might well cause something like this. It would vaporize and leave a glowing cloud behind it."